



COMMISSION ON AGING
Commission on Aging Testimony
Montgomery County Community Development Advisory Committee
Public Hearing on Community Development Needs
October 11, 2011

Hello, I am Judith Welles, a member of Montgomery County's Commission on Aging. It probably does not come as a surprise, given national trends, that Montgomery County's population is growing older. The demographic shift is dramatic, and the increasing older adult population can be seen in all of our diverse ethnic groups.

Today there are 119,769 County residents age 65 years and older. By 2020, that population is projected to increase to more than 150,000, a 74 percent increase since the year 2000.

Montgomery County has 17 percent of Maryland's 65+ population. The County has the largest share of Hispanic elderly in the State; 56.8% of all elderly Hispanic seniors in Maryland reside in Montgomery County.

The Commission on Aging advises County Government and advocates for older adults to age successfully in Montgomery County. We are developing a Senior Agenda that outlines what the County must address to become a Community for a Lifetime, a place for older adults to live safe, healthy and vital lives.

The Commission on Aging, through summer study projects and committees, has worked to respond to the growing desire of County residents to age in place in their homes or communities. The difficulty of some tasks for them, such as home maintenance and driving, has led to aging in place "Villages" where neighbors help one another. But if we look ahead, more planning and community development are needed to address options for aging in place. More planning is needed to encourage transportation options and walkable communities and to stimulate affordable in-home services, beyond what volunteers can do. To the extent that we can develop communities where people can age with supportive services to meet their needs, we can reduce the high costs of institutionalization and health care.

The Commission's priorities are those older adults who are vulnerable and at-risk and those of low and middle-income whose continued independence also relies on certain services. At this time of recession, finding housing for needy elderly is reaching crisis levels. Waiting lists for Montgomery County's subsidized housing programs have increased as federal funding has decreased. The housing voucher program currently serves 1183 elderly heads of household, but there are more than 2,300 on voucher waiting lists. Moreover, there are 686 elderly on the waiting list for public housing.

We continue to stress that the County considers the overall needs of older adults and the cumulative effect of programs when changes are made. For example, in FY09, 69 percent of Adult Protective Services referrals were for seniors 65 years and older. In FY11 the number of referrals for the same age group increased to 81 percent, a significant upward trend. This is our most vulnerable population, and the Commission on Aging believes that we have a responsibility to ensure their safety. It is therefore critically important to maintain the variety of services provided by the Department of Health and Human Services. Seniors who are referred to APS must be provided with a continuum of services designed to meet their needs, including in-home care, nutrition, case management, long term care ombudsman services, mental health services, and specialized senior housing.

Our second priority, from a budgetary perspective, is the provision of services to low-and middle-income older adults who live more independently. While less vulnerable, they too have been adversely affected by the program cuts that were made in the past year.

More than 25 percent of County seniors age 65 and older, the majority of whom are women, live alone. An estimated 18 percent of seniors have a limitation in performing activities of daily living. Depending on their income level, they need different services. For some, case management, transportation, in-home assistance, dental services, congregate and home delivered meals are essential. In addition, respite care is often needed in situations where the senior lives with a caregiver.

For the past several years there has been a reduction of library access and recreation services. While the Recreation Department has reintroduced some senior programming, these programs are not widespread, and transportation is needed for older adults who are unable to drive. Participating in social and recreational programs, which often include preventive health services, decreases older adults' isolation, helps them maintain cognitive and mental health, and reduces the possibility of costly County services and potential institutionalization.

Older adults are a large and rapidly growing segment of the County's population. The cost of not supporting older adults will increase dramatically as the population ages. We urge the Advisory Committee to look at the overall needs of both vulnerable and vital older adults in identifying ways to maintain and strengthen services to this important group of Montgomery County residents.